

More Adventures of THE CONTINENTAL OP

WOMAN IN THE DARK

by **DASHIELL HAMMETT**

*Collected and Edited,
with Introduction by
ELLERY QUEEN*

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

LAWRENCE E. SPIVAK, Publisher

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THE MAN WHO STOOD IN THE WAY

THE SENATOR kept biting his lip, as if he were beset with problems of insurmountable difficulty. He was a massive man, exuding an air of power. The spacious leather chair in which he sat seemed scarcely adequate for his weight; bulky shoulders and arms bulged over its sides with a suggestion of overflowing.

The Senator's head under his crisp mane of iron-gray hair was massive, too, and his features were large, cragged, and graven with the lines that indicate power.

When he arose presently and crossed the library to get whiskey and cigars for his guests, the immense room seemed to dwindle in an abrupt shrinking of wall and ceiling; and the polished floor threatened each instant to creak under the tread of his heavy feet, though it was far too genteel—as befitted a floor in a Dupont Circle home—ever actually to creak. The vacated chair gaped wide, appeared, as the great upholstered cavern it really was, to lose its dignity immediately the Senator dropped into it again.

In marked contrast with the Senator was the man who sat stiffly upright on the edge of one of the room's least comfortable chairs and, ignoring the allure of the imported cigars his host had set at his elbow, employed a gnarled thumb to cram coarse, black tobacco into a yellow-gray corncob pipe.

He looked sixty-five, though he may have been ten years younger, and the years had served to parch rather than to mellow him. His unkempt hair, to the extent that it had survived, was a dingy yellow-white which had probably been sandy in its youth; a mustache of the same hue, except where tobacco had stained it a richer shade, straggled over withered lips. His forehead was low, narrow, and of an almost reptilian flatness; his nose was long and pinched and drooping below flat, lusterless eyes of a faded, unrecognizable color; his chin was frankly

receding.

In his thick-soled boots he would have stood less than five and a half feet — say, just a trifle above the Senator's shoulder — and the beam of scales set at a hundred and five pounds would have been undisturbed by his presence. He wore a baggy suit of a once-snuff color, and a soft black hat lay on the floor beside his chair.

The pipe loaded, he turned to the table, filled a glass from the bottle, and drained it with neither the shudder nor the appreciative grimace which usually accompanies the drinking of straight whiskey. Then, disregarding the matches on the stand beside him, he felt in the pockets of his vest, brought out a match with the common brown head so seldom seen nowadays, ignited it sputteringly on the sole of a boot, and lighted his pipe.

His glance never for an instant rested on any of the furnishings of the luxurious room; it ranged from the Senator to the pipe, to the hat on the floor, and then back to the Senator.

Obviously unused to the elegance in which he now found himself, that little man was not comfortable, not at home; but his attitude was certainly not one of awe — rather he seemed to disapprove of the sybaritic apartment, and, disapproving, to ignore it altogether.

The Senator chewed a cigar, frowned at his feet, and talked. He was counted in political circles a reticent man, one who expressed himself crisply and concisely, with a great economy of words. But his conversation now was at variance with that reputation.

He talked desultorily, letting his sentences lose themselves half-formed, their logical endings being replaced by irrelevancies or not at all. The little man answered now and then with drawled monosyllables in a dry, reedy voice; he was plainly not engrossed by his host's words. It was clear that the Senator had not sent for him to discuss crops and the political situation in Sudlow County.

The Senator wasted three-quarters of an hour in this nervous dalliance. Then he threw his cold cigar into the fireplace and

slid his chair forward to within a foot of his guest's. He leaned still closer, the lines between his eyebrows deepening.

"But all this isn't what I wanted to see you for, Inch," he said, his deep voice impressive even in its half-whisper. "I am in trouble. I need help."

Gene Inch nodded his head slightly.

"Can I count on you?" And then, as the meaningless nod came again, "You know I pardoned Tom when I was governor."

It was true enough that the impetus behind that pardoning had been political expediency; but what of it? He had pardoned Tom Inch.

Gene Inch took the pipe from his mouth and said: "Yeah, I know you pardoned Tom. You don't have to remind a Inch of his debts."

"You'll help me, then?"

"Uh-huh. Who do you want killed?"

The Senator quailed.

"Killed?" he repeated in a tone of horror. "Killed?"

Inch bared his stained and broken teeth in an evil grin.

"I hope it ain't no worse than that," he said. "But supposing you tell me what's what."

The Senator laid an unsteady hand on the other's bony knee.

"I'm being blackmailed. It has been going on for years, since shortly after I came to Sudlow County. All the years I was in the State legislature, when I was governor, and now since I have been senator, I have been paying — paying more and more every year. And now — now I've got to stop it. Inch, I have made a lot of friends since I have been here in Washington, and they are talking of running me for President. But I can't go ahead unless I shake this blackmailer off. I *must* shake him off, or I am stopped! The more prominent I become, the more insolent he is — it strengthens his hand just that much more — and if I should be elected President of this country. . . . I can't even try unless I get rid of him!"

Inch's face hadn't lighted up at mention of either the blackmailer or the Senator's presidential hopes, and his eyes were as

void of fire as ever.

"Where'll I find this fellow?" he asked laconically.

"Wait, Gene," the Senator said. "We must be careful. There must be no scandal or my position will be even worse than now. I want you to fix it so he won't bother me, but I don't want anything done that will bring on worse trouble."

Inch let a shade of his contempt for this nicety show in the lift of his lips, and then he said:

"Well, I reckon you better tell me more about it, then."

The Senator's eyes narrowed. He spoke aloud, but more to himself than to his guest:

"I pardoned your boy Tom when he was serving life for killing Dick Haney. . . . All right!

"I came to Sudlow County nearly twenty years ago, remember? Well, I came there after escaping from the California State prison at San Quentin. I got in a fight in Oakland one night and killed a man. I wasn't known in Oakland and I gave a false name when I was arrested. I took my real name again after I escaped — I don't know of anybody else who ever did it from there. I was sentenced to thirty years, but after a year and a half I escaped. About two years after I had settled in Sudlow County a man who had been in San Quentin with me recognized me. Frank McPhail was his name, but he goes by the name of Henry Bush now. I've been paying him every cent I could scrape together ever since."

Inch twisted the end of his long nose reflectively.

"Any chance of facing it down? I mean, can he prove anything?"

"The fingerprints — they are still on file at San Quentin."

"Do you reckon there's anybody in on it besides this Bush?"

The Senator shook his head.

"I am reasonably certain that he hasn't told anyone else" — bitterly — "or I should have heard from them, too."

"Where does this Bush live at? And what does he look like?"

"Wait, Gene!" the Senator pleaded. "You can't walk up and shoot him. He is well known here in Washington, and he is

known to be a friend of mine—he has boasted enough of our intimacy! No matter how careful you are, if you kill him something would leak out, and I'd be worse off than I am now. And, besides, I can't stomach murder!"

Inch tweaked his nose thoughtfully again and focused his flat eyes on the dirty bowl of his pipe.

"What's the next nearest city to here?" he asked.

"Baltimore is only forty miles away."

"Do you reckon this Bush is known much in Baltimore?"

"I don't think he is. Why?"

Inch thrust the pipe into his pocket and picked up his hat.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he said.

The following evening Gene Inch called upon the Senator again. He stayed but a few minutes, talking to the Senator in the reception hall.

"You tell this Bush you want him to come see you tomorrow in Baltimore; that you'll be waiting for him in Room 411 at the Strand Hotel between ten and eleven at night; that he's to come right up to the room and not ask for you at the desk, because you ain't going to be registered under your own name. Can you make him swallow it?"

"I think so," the Senator said hesitantly, "but he'll be suspicious and come prepared for trouble. What are you going to do, Gene? You aren't going to —"

"You leave me be," Inch said querulously. "I'm going to fix this thing. Do as I tell you. It don't make no difference what he thinks, or how suspicious he is, get him over there and I'll get you out of your troubles."

The Senator's muscular hand shook as he opened the door for his caller; the skinny hand that pulled Inch's black hat down on his head was as steady as a Sudlow County boulder.

A dim light from the corridor entered Room 411 through the transom; through the closed window came a faint glow from the street lights; the two diluted the darkness in the room

to an artificial, bluish twilight.

Gene Inch sat on a chair in a corner near the door, facing the door. He wore a suit of coarse, heavy underwear, which bulged in ill-fitting folds here and there over his angular figure.

Clamped between his teeth was the stem of a cold pipe; a battered and scratched revolver of heavy caliber hung from one hand. His bare feet were flat on the carpeted floor in an attitude of patient ease.

A clock somewhere struck ten. Twenty minutes passed. Then the knob of the unlocked door turned, the door opened, and a burly figure stood in the doorway. A black automatic pistol held high against the figure's chest pointed into the room.

The muzzle of Inch's revolver slid forward and nudged the side of the burly man. The latter's muscles jumped suddenly, but his feet did not move. Slowly his right hand opened and the automatic thudded dully on the floor.

Inch stepped back and said: "Come in and close the door behind you."

Then he motioned his captive to a chair and sat on the bed.

"You're Bush, I reckon."

"Yes, and if you think —"

"Shut your mouth and listen!"

Bush subsided before the menace in the reedy voice of this queer little man in ridiculous clothes who squinted wickedly at him in the dusk over the barrel of the enormous revolver.

"Take off your coat."

Bush obeyed.

"Throw it on the foot of the bed."

Bush hesitated. It might be possible to fling the coat at this old man's head and close with him. But, his eyes now accustomed to the dim light, he saw that the withered finger around the trigger held it back against the grip — the cocked hammer was restrained only by the pressure of the thumb. That pressure removed, the hammer would fall. Gently Bush tossed his coat to the bed. Inch went through the pockets with his left hand, removing everything. Then he threw the coat on the floor.

"Turn out your other pockets."

Bush emptied the pockets of his trousers and waistcoat: a knife, some keys, a few coins, a roll of paper money, a watch, a handkerchief.

"This suit is tailor-made, huh?" Inch said. "Then there had ought to be labels on the pants and vest as well as the coat. Take the knife and rip 'em all out. Give me your hat."

While the puzzled blackmailer — not yet suspecting his captor's intention — removed all the markings from his clothes Inch examined the hat. No initials were in it.

"Put on your coat and hat," he ordered. "Now put all them things back in your pocket except them bills, and your watch. You can drop the labels on the floor. Now stand back against the wall."

Inch picked up the roll of paper money and put it in the pocket of his trousers, which hung over the back of a chair. The watch, the cloth labels, and the things he had taken from Bush's coat he rolled in a handkerchief and put in his valise.

"Say —" Bush began.

"Shut your mouth!" Inch snapped irritably.

Then the old man looked carefully around the room and chuckled with sour satisfaction. He backed to the bed and pulled the covers down with his free hand and got into the bed, the revolver still menacing the other. He pulled the white covers up across his chest, half-sitting, half-lying against the pillows. Then slowly he drew the revolver back toward his body. The muzzle cleared the edge of the covers and slid out of sight.

Bush's mouth hung slack, bewilderment filled his face. As the weapon disappeared beneath the covers he contracted his leg muscles in the first movement of a spring. Before he could bend his knees in the second movement the room shook with a heavy explosion. A smoldering hole appeared on the white surface of the topsheet and grew rapidly larger. Bush toppled to the floor with blood seeping from a hole in his left breast. The room reeked with the blended odors of gunpowder and burning cloth.

Inch scrambled out of bed, took a flashlight and a homemade

black mask from a dresser drawer, and dropped them beside the dead man. Then he kicked the automatic pistol, which lay near the door, over near one lifeless hand.

Fifteen minutes later the hotel detective and a policeman were examining the remains of Henry Bush, and listening to Gene Inch's story of retiring early, waking to see a man bending over the chair on which his clothes hung, carefully drawing his revolver from under the pillow, being surprised in that act by the burglar, and having to shoot through the bedcovers.

The detective and the patrolman finished their examination and conferred.

"Nothing to identify him by."

"No; not even a watch or anything we could trace."

"No use trying to trace the gun. Burglars don't get 'em that way."

The policeman turned to Inch.

"Come down to headquarters in the morning—about ten o'clock."

And then, admiringly: "You sure hit him pretty for having to shoot through them bedclothes!"

"The Senator is not in," said the girl in the outer office.

"Now, sister, you tell him Gene Inch wants to see him."

"But he—"

"Run along and tell him, sister."

The Senator came to the door of his private office to receive Inch and to usher him in. The Senator's face was pallid and he seemed to be having trouble with his breathing. The eyes that met Inch's held a strange mixture of hope and fear.

When they were alone in the private office Inch nodded.

"It's all done. Everything is all right."

"And he—"

"I seen by the papers where an unidentified burglar was killed trying to rob a farmer in a Baltimore hotel."

The Senator relaxed into a chair with a sobbing breath.

"Are you positive, Gene, that there can be no slip-up?"

Inch clucked scornfully.

"Ain't nothing can happen."

The Senator got to his feet and stretched out both hands to his savior.

"I can't ever pay you in full for what you have done, Gene, but no matter —"

Inch turned his rounded back upon the other's gratitude and walked to the door. With one hand on the knob he turned, leered malevolently at the Senator, and said:

"I'll expect a check on the first of every month; and I hope you get to be President — it'll mean a lot to me."

For a long space the Senator stood staring dumbly into the little man's flat, lifeless eyes. Then comprehension came to him. His knees sagged and he crumpled into his chair.

"But, Gene —"

"*But* hell!" Inch snarled. "The first of every month!"

THE END

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